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A tribute to Abraham Lincoln

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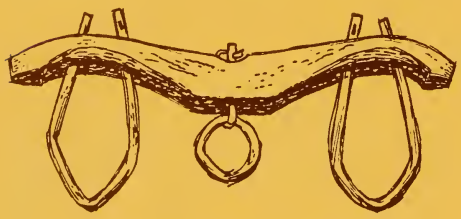

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A Tribute

to

Abraham Lincoln

By

Ignatius Donnelly

AMONG the unpublished manuscripts of Ignatius Donnelly, student, scholar, statesman, and one of Minnesota's Congressmen during the "dark days" of the Civil War, is a penciled tribute to Abraham Lincoln.

Many articles have been printed concerning the Great Emancipator but none have ever paid a higher tribute to Lincoln's greatness. Although close to him when these lines were written, Donnelly appraised Lincoln then as the world knows him after a lapse of three quarters of a century. Donnelly had always a prophetic outlook as is evidenced in his descriptions of battles in the skies told in his book, "Caeser's Column," written a half century before battling planes were known. Such a range of knowledge as displayed by Donnelly has seldom been witnessed in any scholar. He not only looked into the future with canny predictions, but brought the days of prehistoric times to the attention of the present in his book "Atlantis, The Ante-Deluvian World."

From the pen of such a man, these lines, written to the memory of Lincoln, cannot help being of interest to the new America unknown either to Lincoln or Donnelly.

USHER L. BURDICK.

Washington, D. C.
November 27, 1941

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Abraham Lincoln! He was in some respects one of the greatest characters of history—

We scarcely yet do justice to ourselves. We have not outgrown our colonial condition. We looked abroad for greatness. We under-rate ourselves. The effect of free institutions is leveling and belittling. A republic is unfavorable to hero-worship. No man it was said is a hero to his *valet de chambre*. Yet one newspaper reporter of the present day is more fatal to weakness of character than a hundred valets. It was in the misty atmosphere of the untutored past that great men expanded into giants.

But if we consider either the magnitude of the population, or the greatness of the interests, or its elevation of the principles involved, ours is indeed the heroic age of the world.

The task assigned to the Father of his Country was simple compared with that of Abraham Lincoln. The former dealt with a population not larger than that of the State of New York today: he led an army of but twenty thousand men; and he carried on war against an enemy dwelling three thousand miles distant. It may be said that it was the persistence of our people and the width of the Atlantic that achieved American independence. The population of the United States under President Lincoln was over thirty millions; the army he commanded exceeded a million men; the enemy was on our own soil—part of ourselves—close to the heart of the nation.

In some respects Mr. Lincoln's task was greater than that of the First Napoleon. The great Corsican was the head of a military nation, warring against external enemies. The Empire was simply an amplification of the Army of Italy. There were no politics in France during the days of Napoleon's greatness. His will radiated without let or hindrance to the extremities of his empire. France was but a hand to execute the behests of his sovereign genius.

Mr. Lincoln on the other hand was the head of peace-loving people: of a self-governing people:—of a people ready to try his every act in the crucible of their own judgment. While he might guide he could not control them.

The world had seen many military empires, but there were no precedents for such a nation as ours. Our government was an experiment not a century old. It appeared like a thin crust of order spread over the ancient sea of chaos. Human nature was stirred to its fiercest and profoundest depths; and the volcanic forces threatened to engulf the nation.

In the midst of this storm, one of the wildest that ever *broke* on human society, Mr. Lincoln governed. He was neither callous nor blind. His broad mind embraced the whole argument and took in all the contingencies. As the firm earth trembled under his feet the lines on his care-worn face deepened. For his own life he cared little. He had thrown that into the balance when standing in Independence Hall in Philadelphia he said, "But if this nation cannot be saved without giving up the principle of the Declaration of Independence, I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it."

His career as President was marked by the highest statesmanship. While he moved apparently abreast of the people he led them—while he appeared to follow he governed.

He knew every vibration of the great popular heart with its million chords, and with what seemed unconscious words he awoke them to their noblest utterances. Although feeling as he himself said that "if slavery was not wrong nothing was wrong," he nevertheless set the idea of national life in the foreground, and helped solidify the mind of the north by subordinating all other questions to this paramount issue. He said that he was willing to preserve the Union with Slavery but with or without Slavery he would preserve the Union. *He* knew that the Rebellion was Slavery and that Slavery and the Nation could not longer exist together, he had been the first to proclaim the irrepressible conflict, and with subtle and profound philosophy he placed the nation in the foreground and helped to solidify the public mind which

was united on the issue of national life but divided on the question of slavery. Thus again, when he gave the South notice that if they did not lay down their arms before a certain date he would proclaim the liberty of the slaves, many feared that the South would accept his terms and the degrading institution be preserved to endanger the future peace of the nation. Mr. Lincoln better understood the temper of the South. He knew they were firmly resolved upon a separate government and that nothing but overwhelming defeat could damage them: and when therefore the day arrived and the proclamation came the mind of the great man of the people of the North was prepared to sustain it.

This moderation, this wisdom, this broad conception of his surroundings, this fidelity to truth and liberty, was at the same time lighted up and mellowed by veins of the richest humor and kindliest humanity. No gentler or sweeter spirit ever lived. Amid all the horrors of the time, and all the terrors of his own situation living as it were in the very smoke of continuous battle, and the centre of the fiercest passions of his age, although his form became bowed under the enormous load of his cares and responsibilities, his great soul took no color of gloom, no flavor of bitterness from his surroundings. I have seen his poor face, seamed and wrinkled as it was with a thousand lines, relax with some humorous anecdote and the whole genial kindly soul of the man shine through transfiguring it as with inward light.

Out of all the horrors of fierce civil war this magnificent spirit drew neither wrath nor hate nor revenge, but in the darkest hour seemed faithfully resigned to the task before him. He subdued wrath with gentle kindness; hate with love for his fellow man; revenge with benign sympathy and understanding. In all the history of mankind no man, save Christ himself, ever carried a more unbearable burden with forgiveness written upon every line in his sad face.

In the moment of triumph of a just cause, he was laid low by an assassin's bullet yet if this great soul could speak he would say, "forgive them for they know not what they do." This was the Lincoln I knew so well in the darkest hour of our nation's history.

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